A True Story

of the Civil War

by Aldis F. Walker

Late Lieutenant Colonel
Eleventh Vermont Infantry

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On the morning of September 13, 1864, Getty's Division moved out towards the Opequan for a reconnoissance. The Vermont Brigade had the advance, the Third and Fourth being deployed in front as skirmishers. Sheridan and Wright accompanied the column. At ten o'clock the skirmishers reached the creek and crossed it at once, meeting the rebel pickets, however, but a short distance up the hill beyond. Capt. Cowen's Battery, going into position on an elevation on the hither side of the little stream, opened fire, the General hoping thus to discover the position of the enemy's camps in the vicinity, their strength, and other information of that nature. The battery could be plainly seen from the opposite side; the skirmishers who had crossed were showing an occasional puff of smoke from their rifles, while the rest of the Division were massed in a wood, a quarter of a mile behind the artillery. The grove was clean and the shade was dense; the men were

scattered in groups among the stacks of arms, chatting carelessly or playing their simple games.

The enemy presently planted a heavier battery than Cowen's upon a hill on the opposite side of the creek and returned his fire; their first few shells, being fired at too high an elevation, passed over his guns at which they were aimed, ploughing through and exploding among the troops of the Division which lay concealed in the timber. Several were wounded, and the lines were formed for removal to some other position, but it being noticed that the missiles began to fall short of us, we were soon convinced that our situation was unknown to the enemy, and in a few minutes the danger was over.

Among those who were wounded on this occasion was Lieutenant Harry E. Bedell of the Eleventh Vermont. He was a man of splendid physique, muscular and athletic, over six feet high, about twenty-eight years of age, a farmer, married, and the father of two or three children. An unexploded shell had crashed through his left leg above the knee, leaving flesh at either side, and a most ghastly mass of mangled muscles, shattered bones, and gushing arteries between. As he lay upon the ground he screamed continually, "Cord it! Cord it! Don't let me bleed to death!" The first rude tourniquet which a friend attempted to apply broke under the twisting of the ramrod, and allowed the spurting torrent again to flow. But when the compression was complete, he became quiet under the perhaps imaginary impression of temporary security, allowing

himself to be lifted upon a stretcher and borne away to the surgeons and their ambulances without a groan. An operation was speedily performed. The leg was amputated at the upper third, everything being done for the sufferer that science and personal regard could suggest and the rude circumstances permitted.

Still there was very little hope. Though his natural vigor was in his favor, his very size and the muscular strength on which he had prided himself were against him, for it was computed that over sixty-four square inches of flesh were laid bare by the surgeon's knife. And it was also found that his right hand had been seriously injured, the bones of three fingers being fractured and comminuted. The operation already performed had been so severe that it was thought best not to attempt the treatment of the hand until it was seen whether or not he would rally from the shock of the wounds and the amputation. We returned to our camp about nightfall; the journey was a terrible trial to the wounded man. An ambulance under the most favorable circumstances is hardly a "downy bed of ease," and the jolting this remnant of a man for miles across the country, over fences and walls half torn down, and across ditches partially filled with rails, reduced the chances of his life to hardly one in a thousand, his immediate death being expected every moment. But, sustained by stimulants and his indomitable courage, at last in the darkness he reached the army lines alive.

Fortunately a house was accessible, and the use of a vacant room in its second story was obtained,

where Bedell was placed on a tick hastily stuffed with straw and resting on the floor. And to the surprise of every one he survived the night; a little hope even of saving his life was awakened. On the second day after the skirmish the surgeons decided to attempt the re-habilitation of the shattered hand. A finger or two were removed, the broken bones were adjusted, and the patient rallied in good spirits from the second administration of chloroform and shock to the system. But his struggle for life was only just commenced. After a few days of such rest as his miserable pallet could afford, orders were issued, in preparation for the coming battle of the Opequan, that all sick and wounded should be at once removed to Harper's Ferry, twenty miles distant. Army wagons and ambulances were therefore loaded with the unfortunates, and an attempt was made to transport poor Bedell with the rest. But previously endured a rougher journey, it was while his wounds were, as wounds are for the first few hours, partially benumbed, the nerves seeming paralyzed with the very rudeness of the injury. Now the torn flesh had become inflamed and was having its revenge.

At every motion of the ambulance he groaned fearfully, and it was soon apparent that to carry him a mile would cost him his life. He was returned to his straw utterly exhausted, all but expiring.

The army was to move the next morning. The surgeons were forced to decide at once what they would do with the dying man. In fact, but one course was open, he must be abandoned to his fate. True,

we were to leave him to the north of us, but in the Valley no attempt was ever made to cover the long line of our communications. Strong escorts guarded our supply trains, and for the rest Mosby had free swing. Moreover though we did not know it at the time, Martinsburg was thenceforth to be our base, instead of Harper's Ferry; and the vicinity of Berryville, where we then were, instead of being threaded once in four days by our caravans, as we expected, was not re-visited by our troops or trains for months. The wounded officer was therefore left on his chamber floor with a soldier nurse, and such hospital stores as he would be likely to need before his death.

We fought the battles of the Opequan and Fisher's Hill, "whirling" the enemy up the Valley, for a month supposing the Lieutenant dead. The attendant left with him followed us immediately; Bedell himself thought it best, and it was doubtless necessary, for the country swarmed with guerillas, and the system of bloody reprisals engaged in by Mosby and Custer reduced the probable life or death of the nurse to a simple question of time, had he remained.

It appears that the family who allowed our officer the use of the naked room as a place in which to die, were hardly pleased with their guest; in fact they seem to have been utterly destitute of sympathy, and to have thought it best for all concerned that he should leave this world and them as speedily as possible—and they left him at perfect liberty to do so. The promises they had so solemnly made us to give the wounded officer care and attention, were entirely

neglected, and his chamber was never entered. Death, horrible in its loneliness and pain, would inevitably have come quickly, had not a Good Samaritan appeared. A Rebel among Rebels, there was a woman who most nobly proved herself to unite with a tender heart the rarest courage and perseverance beyond account.

Mrs. Bettie Van Metre was a Virginian, born in the Luray Valley; scarcely twenty at the time in question, and of attractive personal appearance. She had been educated in comfortable circumstances, and before the war her husband had been moderately wealthy, but now his farm was as barren as a desert, not a fence to be seen, and nothing to protect had any enclosure remained; there was a mill upon the premises, but the miller had gone to fight for his country, as he believed, and there was now no grain left in the country to be ground. Officers who had called at her door, remarked the brave attempt at cheerfulness which so manifestly struggled with her sorrow, and treated her grief with deference. For this delicately nurtured girl was living alone in the midst of war, battles had raged around her very dwelling, she was entirely at the mercy of those whom she had been taught to believe to be her deadly enemies, and who held her husband and brother prisoners in Fort Delaware, taken while fighting in the Confederate army, the brother being, until long after this time, supposed to be dead. Her only companion was a little girl, perhaps ten years of age, her niece. There this young woman and this child were waiting in their anxiety

and desolation, waiting and praying for peace. We should hardly expect the practice of active, laborious, gratuitous benevolence under such circumstances, but we shall see.

It is not known how Mrs. Van Metre learned that a Union officer was dying of wounds and neglect in the house of her neighbor, but no sooner had she made the discovery than all her womanly sympathy was aroused. As she would have longed to have her husband or her brother treated under similar circumstances, so she at once resolved to treat their foe. She would not be moved by the sneers and taunts which were sure to come, but she would have him at her own house and save him if she could.

The Lieutenant had now been entirely neglected for a day or two longer; he had resigned himself to death, when this good woman entered his chamber and with kindly words called back his spirit from the mouth of the grave.

She had been allowed to keep an apology for a horse, so old and broken-winded and rheumatic that he was not worth stealing, and also a rickety wagon. With the assistance of a neighbor whose color permitted him to be humane, she carried the sufferer to her house, and at last he found himself in a clean and comfortable bed, his wounds washed and his bandages cleansed, and best of all his wants anticipated by a gentle female tenderness that inspired him with sweet thoughts of his home, his family, and his life even yet perhaps to be regained.

The physician of the neighborhood, a kind old

gentleman, was at once summoned from a distance of several miles, and uniting personal sympathy with professional zeal, he promised his daily attendance upon the invalid. The chance was still but a slender one, so much had been endured, and so little vigor remained, yet those two good people determined to expend their most earnest endeavors in the almost desperate attempt to save the life of an enemy.

And they succeeded. The details of convalescence are always uninteresting; it is enough to say that Bedell lay for many days wrestling with death, but at last he began to mend, and from that time his improvement was rapid. But although Mrs. Van Metre and the good doctor were able to supply the Lieutenant's most pressing wants, still much more than they could furnish was needed for the comfort of the invalid, and even for the proper treatment of his wounds. No stimulants could be obtained except the vilest apple-jack and the necessity for them seemed absolute; no clothing was to be had and he was still in his bloody garments of blue; delicate food was needed, but the impoverished Virginia larder had none but what was simple and coarse.

At Harper's Ferry, however, there was a depot of our Sanitary Commission and stores in abundance. Some one must undertake a journey thither. It was a long day's ride to make the distance and return, and success was by no means assured even if the storehouse could be reached. It was in the charge of strangers and enemies. The Lieutenant was too feeble to write, and even if he had been able to do so,

there was no method of authenticating his signature. But a woman would be far more likely to succeed than a man, and in fact no man would be allowed to pass within the limits of the garrison encircling Harper's Ferry. So it came about that the feeble Rosinante and the rattling wagon and the brave-hearted solitary driver, made the dangerous journey and brought back a feast of good things for the sufferer.

The picket had been seduced by her eloquence to send her to headquarters, under charge of a guard which watched her carefully as a probable spy. The General in command had seen fit to allow her to carry away such trifling articles as the Commission people would be willing to give and although the chances were even that the gifts would be used in building up some wounded rebel, still the earnestness and the apparent truthfulness of her entreaty for relief overbore all scruples; the old-fashioned vehicle was loaded with the wished for supplies and the suspicious guard escorted the cargo beyond the lines.

The trip was thereafter repeated week by week, and when letters were at length received in answer to those deposited by the fair messenger, postmarked among the Green Mountains, her triumph was complete, and her draft good for anything the Sanitary treasury contained. The only lingering doubt was in regard to the enormous amount of whiskey the invalid required. Mrs. Van Metre, however, explained that it was needed for diplomatic as well as medicinal purposes. Of course it had been bruited about among the neighbors that the miller's wife was nursing a

Federal officer. In that region now abandoned to the rule of Mosby and his men, concealment was essential. Therefore, the old men who had heard of the convalescent must be taken into confidence and pledged to secrecy, a course rendered possible only by the liberal use of the Spiritus Frumenti. Under the influence of such liquor as had not been guzzled in the Valley since the peaceful days of Buchanan, the venerable rascals were easily convinced that such a shattered life as that of the Lieutenant could not greatly injure their beloved Confederacy.

Five weeks after Bedell received his wound, our army was encamped on Cedar Creek, and Sheridan was in Washington. The Lieutenant greatly needed his valise from our baggage wagons. Therefore a journey of twenty miles up the Valley was planned, which brought our heroine and her little niece to the army again, with a few words by the maimed right hand of her charge as her credentials. Our feelings of wonder and admiration were most intense, as we learned from her simple story, that our favorite who was dead was alive again, and felt how much true heroism her modest words concealed. She had plainly totally abandoned herself for weeks to the care of a suffering enemy, and yet she did not seem to realize that she deserved any credit for so doing, or that every woman would not have done as much. We loaded her with the rude attentions of the camp, and she spent the night comfortable (from a military point of view) in a vacant tent at General Getty's headquarters. The desired valise was then at Winchester but she obtained it on her return.

The next daybreak found us fighting the Battle of Cedar Creek. Amid the mounting in hot haste and the thronging confusion of the morning's surprise, General Getty found time to commit his terrified guests to the care of an orderly, who by a circuitous route conducted them safely out of the battle.

While our army was near Berryville in September, some of General Getty's staff-officers had called upon Mrs. Van Metre, and had persuaded her to prepare for them a meal or two from the army rations, there being a magnetism in female cookery that the blades of the staff were always craving. In her visit to the army just mentioned, she learned that one of those casual acquaintances had fallen at the former battle of the Opequan, and that his body was still lying somewhere on that wild battle-field. Seizing the earliest opportunity after her return, she personally searched all through the territory between Opequan Creek and Winchester, amid the carrion and the graves, until she found at last the rude board with its almost obliterated inscription that fixed the identity of the too scantily covered corpse. Shocked at the sight, for the rain had exposed the limbs, and the crows had mangled them, she procured a coffin and laborers from Winchester and had the remains decently interred in the cemetery there at her own expense. Then she addressed a letter to his friends giving them the information she possessed, and they subsequently recovered the relics, thanking God and their unknown benefactor.

We heard nothing further from the Lieutenant for months. We eventually learned, however, that after a long period of such careful nursing, varied only by the weekly errand of Mrs. Van Metre to Harper's Ferry for letters and supplies, the prudent doctor at last gave his consent that Bedell should attempt the journey home. Armed now with a pair of Sanitary crutches, he doubted not that he could make his way, if he once could reach the Union lines. But the difficulty of getting to Harper's Ferry cost him much anxiety. Though at various times forty guerillas together had been in and about the house where he lay, the watchful care of his protector had thus far kept them in ignorance of his presence. This journey, however, was likely to prove even more difficult to manage. At length one of the toddy-drinking neighbors while relating his trials and losses, chanced to mention the seizure by our troops of a pair of his mules months before, and the fact that a negro had since seen them in the Martinsburgh corral. A happy thought struck the Lieutenant; he at one assured the old gentleman that if he could only be placed (what there was left of him) in safety at the Ferry, the mules should be returned. The promise might perhaps be considered rash, seeing that Martinsburgh was twenty-five miles from Harper's Ferry, under a different commander, that it was very decidedly unusual to restore property seized from the enemy for government use, that the chattels were probably long ago far up the Valley, and especially that Bedell could not have, in any event, the faintest shadow of

authority in the premises. But the old man jumped at the offer and the bargain was struck.

It was decided that Mrs. Van Metre should accompany the Lieutenant home, both for his sake as he was yet months from recovery, and for her own as she had now lived for years in unwonted destitution and anxiety, while a quiet, comfortable home was thenceforth assured to her by her grateful charge until the return of peace; and who knew if she might not in some way regain her own husband, as she had restored another's.

So the party was made up and the journey commenced. The officer was carefully hidden in a capacious farm wagon, under an immense heap of straw, and though two marauding parties were met during the day, the cheerful smile of the well-known farmer disarmed suspicion. The escape was successful. The clumsy vehicle drew up before headquarters at Harper's Ferry, and Bedell, saluted once more by a sentinel as he doffed his hat to the flag he had suffered for, headed the procession to the general's room.

The unique party told its own story. The tall lieutenant, emaciated, staggering on his unaccustomed crutches, the shrinking woman, timid in the presence of authority though so heroic in the presence of death, and the old Virginian, aghast at finding himself actually in the lion's den, but with the burden of an anxious longing written on his wrinkled face, each character so speaking, the group needed only this simple introduction: "General, this man has brought me in and wants his mules."

General Stevenson, warmhearted and sympathetic, comprehended the situation at once. He made the party seat themselves before him and tell him all their story. He fed them at his table and lodged them in his quarters. He telegraphed for a special leave of absence for the officer and secured free transportation for both him and his friend, and finally most surprising of all possible good fortune, he sent the venerable charioteer to Martinsburgh, the happy bearer of a message that secured the restoration of his long-eared quadrupeds.

On the next day the lieutenant and Mrs. Van Metre went by rail to Washington, where of course everyone treated them kindly and gave them all possible assistance. When the paymaster had been visited and all preparations made for their journey north, it was determined to make an effort to secure the release of the rebel prisoner. So it came about that the quasi-widow and the crippled officer called together upon Secretary Stanton. The busiest of all busy men found time to hear their story, and despite the "stony heart" attributed to him by his enemies, he was deeply affected by the touching tale, and the ocular demonstration of its truth in the person of the wounded soldier. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he gave the order requested, earned by acts that few women would have dared; and the couple with glad hearts, crossing the street to the office of the Commissary General of Prisoners, presented the document to the clerk in charge to be vised. But here another difficulty arose. Some one had blundered, and on searching the records of the

office the required name could not be found. The cruel report was made that no such prisoner had been taken.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Van Metre's information had been direct and her conviction of some mistake was sure. They laid the case before General Hitchcock, then in charge of that office, and again the story was argument enough. With trembling hands the old gentleman endorsed the order: "The commanding officer at Fort Delaware will release any person the bearer may claim as her husband!"

The prison barracks were quickly reached. The Commandant caused the thousands of grizzly captives to be paraded. File after file was anxiously, Oh! how anxiously, scanned by the trembling woman, and when the circuit was almost completed, when her sinking heart was almost persuaded that death instead of capture had indeed been the fate of the one she loved, she recognized his face despite his unkept hair and his tattered garments, and fell upon the neck of her husband as he stood in the weary ranks.

A few days more and the two families were at rest in Bedell's New England home.

Lieutenant Bedell continued to improve with the genial surroundings of his home and family and the beautiful scenery of the green hills of his native state. He kept Mr. and Mrs. Van Metre with him until the war closed. Lieutenant Bedell and his noble wife gave them all the comforts and pleasures that open hands and loving hearts or money could buy.

The story of the noble and angelic acts of Mrs. Van Metre were told all over that part of the state,

and hundreds came to see the heroine that had so nobly cared for and nursed back to life one of their neighbors.

Soon after the close of the war, the Van Metres expressed a desire to return to their old home. Lieutenant Bedell went to the bank and drawing a large sum of money, the three started for West Virginia. They stopped a few days at Baltimore and Bedell bought lumber and trimmings for a house better and more modern than the one that was destroyed by the vandals of one side or the other, furniture to furnish it, material to fence the whole farm, fruit trees of all kinds to set out an orchard that had been cut down, and bought a team with harness and wagon and farming implements.

Bedell stayed with them until the house was finished, the farm well fenced, the trees set for a new orchard, a fine flower garden in the front yard, and after seeing that they had plenty of good clothing to last them for a year and provisions to last until they could raise a crop, Bedell bade them an affectionate farewell and returned to his Green Mountain home.

Mrs. Van Metre died about the year 1898. What joy there must have been in heaven when her soul left this body and met by a countless number of angels singing her glory. The gates were likely wide open and the King said, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was sick and ye visited me; I was a stranger, and ye took me in."

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